Lyndon Johnson vs The Ghost of Jack Kennedy

by Tom Wicker

Two years ago, November 22nd, the New Frontier ended.
It is the time of the Great Society now,
and Lyndon Johnson wants you to love only him.
Should you?

November, 1963 — How it was!!
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The fact of the matter is that it was not one of the better months of the Kennedy years in Washington—that November of 1963. It was good football weather most of the time, as I recall it, and a lot of things happened that made good copy, but most of us felt we were marking time. We were on the edge of an election year and if there was anyone in town who believed President Kennedy would be defeated, he was brooding in silence, not speaking out. The real question, the deep thinkers said, was whether Kennedy could win a big victory and turn it into the kind of accomplishment he had promised in 1960 but hadn't been able to deliver.

People talked a great deal about Barry Goldwater, who obviously was getting ready to run and who was beginning to be taken as a serious candidate in a town accustomed to thinking of him as pretty far out. Kennedy, however, was doing nothing to build up Goldwater and still was dealing with him lightly.

"Senator Goldwater," he told the A.F.L.-C.I.O. convention in New York, "asked for labor's support before two thousand cheering Illinois businessmen." And at a news conference, he sharpened the needle. He would not criticize the Senator just then, he said, because "he himself has had a busy week selling T.V.A. and . . . suggesting that military commanders overseas be permitted to use nuclear weapons, attacking the President of Bolivia while he was here in the United States, involving himself in the Greek elections. So I thought it really would not be fair for me this week to reply to him."

The Diem government was overthrown in Saigon and both Ngo Dinh Diem and Ngo Dinh Nhu were assassinated. Duong Van Minh, a general known as Big Minh, took over the South Vietnamese government and both the State Department and the White House made it plain that, while they regretted the deaths, they thought the new regime would be better able to prosecute the guerrilla war.

Nevertheless, the downfall of the Diems seemed one more indication that the high hopes with which the Kennedy Administration had got under way three years earlier were somewhat threadbare. Kennedy had put his bets down on Diem, and the increased American commitment to the South Vietnamese government that he had made in 1961 had been his first real show of muscle in the Cold War. Now, if there was a sense of starting over again in Vietnam, the death of Diem still was a tacit admission that Kennedy either had backed the wrong horse and stayed with him too long, or else had abandoned an ally under pressure. No one seriously doubted that the coup had been acquiesced in and perhaps aided by the United States. Such knowledge runs against the American sense of righteousness.

That November, Kennedy had plenty of other troubles besides the Goldwater boom and a baffling, faraway war that no one liked.

The Soviets had copped a Yale professor, Frederick G. Barghoorn, in Moscow and jailed him for spying. Nikita Khrushchev said convoy incidents at Berlin had increased the threat of war. The sale of American wheat to the Russians was blocked on the question of whether it should be for cash or on the cuff.

The Administration put new restrictions on Red diplomats' travel here, probably in retaliation for Barghoorn's incarceration (the Soviets turned him loose late in the month still insisting he was a spy). Kennedy was forced to admit he couldn't pull as many troops out of Vietnam as he had promised earlier that he would. Treasury experts met with representatives of nine nations to worry over liquidity and the monetary system and announced the possibility of a new unit of international currency. And in case anyone should forget the Caribbean, a Cuban refugee entered the White House in the tourist line, picked up one of Mrs. Kennedy's Greek urns, and threw it through one of her antique mirrors.

The balance-of-payments deficit was down to a six-year low in the third quarter, but there was no political mileage in that. Labor announced a $750,000 kitty to register Democrats for an all-out fight against what George Meany called Goldwater "reaction," but Labor is always with the Democrats. Congress upped the Peace Corps budget to $102,000,000 from $59,000,000, but there were few other legislative victories in sight.

Kennedy gave up publicly on getting his civil-rights and tax-cut bills enacted in 1963, although he predicted an "eighteen-month delivery" for 1964. "Westward look, the land is bright," he quipped about this prospect, sounding as if he were trying to cheer himself up. Foreign aid, he also conceded, was under the hardest attack since the Marshall Plan; he managed to salvage the program, but it was badly cut and tied his hands in dealing with Eastern Europe.

Southern reporters wrote that Kennedy's popularity was at a low ebb in Dixie due to his civil-rights program, Brother Bobby's Justice Department agitators and Senator Goldwater's availability. The Fed raised the margin requirement for the first time in five years, from fifty to seventy percent, and Wall Street grumbled. John Kennedy went to Florida and denied he was soaking the rich. But after the steel crisis a year and a half earlier, the fat cats seemed to have had enough of Joe Kennedy's son.

In Philadelphia, analysts were discovering the white backlash as Mayor James H. J. Tate, an unimpressive party pol, squeaked back into office in a municipal election in which the Italian wards barely gave him a majority. A backlash like that against the President, the analysts said, could throw the 1964 election to Goldwater.

Congress was in a mess. It was not just that the narrow Democratic majorities and the Administration's political problems had bogged down the Kennedy program. The *(Continued on page 145)*

whole institution was under fire as an anachronism and Senator Thomas Dodd of Connecticut rose on the Senate floor to charge Majority Leader Mike Mansfield with adopting a "Wall Street attitude" and bankers' hours. The Republicans, he said, were doing nothing, not even providing effective opposition. Everett Dirksen rumbled that Dodd was a victim of "cerebral incoherence." To complete the picture of leaderless chaos, Senator Richard Russell, the South's head coach in Congress, accused his old ally, Charles Halleck of Indiana, of being "adorned in the leather shirt and tasseled moccasins" of the New Frontier because he was backing the civil-rights bill.

For the first time in the Kennedy Administration, the smell of scandal —a familiar odor in Washington— was in the air. Senator John McClellan, the righteous Arkansan who had helped Bob Kennedy pursue Jimmy Hoffa, lambasted Deputy Under Secretary of Defense Roswell L. Gilpatric for an alleged conflict of interest on the TFX. Billie Sol Estes, the Texas free enterpriser, appeared before a Senate hearing and took the Fifth. Secretary of the Navy Fred Korth—another Texan—had resigned and it soon was learned that he had been using Navy stationery for indiscreet private business correspondence. The headwaiter of the House of Representatives, one Ernest Petinaud, was taken on a Congressmen's junket to Paris for no apparent legislative purpose. None of this touched President Kennedy directly, but at a news conference he was forced to defend the moral climate of Washington in his time as being no worse than it was anywhere else.

The biggest scandal was the sudden emergence of a South Carolinian named Robert G. Baker, whom almost everyone in Washington knew, as something more than a good source on Senate affairs and a protégé of Vice-President Lyndon B. Johnson. People who weren't talking politics and Barry Goldwater were either talking about Bobby Baker or burning their files. Some did both.

Johnson had other troubles. The reports from the South were that the Vice-President, who had taken a strong stand behind the President's civil-rights bill, was in worse shape there than Mr. Kennedy himself. Johnson spent part of the month in the Benelux countries, making Atlantic Partnership speeches, but in his home state of Texas, he needed partnership more. There, Governor John Connally, another Johnson associate, and Senator Ralph Yarborough, an anti-Johnson Texas liberal, were locked in the kind of ideological feuding that makes Texas politics unique. The split was so bitter that it threatened to throw Texas' 25 electoral votes to Goldwater—and Johnson's main claim on the Kennedy Administration had been his ability to carry Texas and some of the South for the Democrats.

Robert Kennedy, moreover, had not wanted Johnson on the ticket even in 1960, recalling with resentment the Texan's sharp campaign remarks about John Kennedy and, worse, Joseph P. Kennedy. He had ignored the Vice-President for three years, as did many other Administration officials. Johnson, after all, was not in the spirit of the New Frontier; Washington laughed at the story that he had gone to the unveiling of the Mona Lisa at the National Gallery in white tie and tails when the crowd was in black tie. The camel driver and the Texas bellow in the Taj Mahal had made Georgetown party-goers cringe with embarrassment, and everybody clucked in sympathy when Konrad Adenauer was shipped off to spend a weekend at the LBJ ranch. Where in God's name was *that*?

So there was talk, that November, of "dumping" Johnson in 1964. But one man did not ignore or treat Lyndon Johnson coolly. John Kennedy had a quietly effective relationship with his proud and difficult Vice-President. It was a direct relationship, strictly between two men; the Kennedy staff had to be circumvented since it tended to take the "Bobby line" on Johnson. The President listened to Johnson's advice on politics, though he did not always take it. He did not, for instance, follow through on a Johnson suggestion of a Southern speaking tour to pave the way for the 1964 civil-rights act. Nor was Johnson's advice often proffered unless sought. He would sit silently through high-level meetings, rarely injecting himself into them, absorbing information.

Kennedy gave him useful assignments—civil rights and Congressional liaison at home, goodwill trips abroad. Johnson was sent to deliver a major address in Berlin during the crisis of 1961. He was provided ample office space, staff, perquisites. There were frequent evidences of Kennedy's personal sensitivity to Johnson's feelings. When the White House Correspondents' Association, at an annual banquet, gave the President two silver carriage lamps, his response was notable for courtesy as well as for wit.

"Lyndon Johnson and I," he said, "will hang these in the White House—one for Everett Dirksen and two for Charley Halleck."

Johnson often praised Kennedy in private and he never tired of recalling the President's campaign defense of his religion before the Greater Houston Ministerial Association. Frequently, he added: "I was never so proud of an American as I was of Jack that night."

Kennedy may have recalled that it was Lyndon Johnson who had put him on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee—a breakthrough toward national stature. And at the 1956 Democratic National Convention, in the breakneck Kennedy-Kefauver fight for the vice-presidential nomination, Johnson as chairman of his delegation had cast "fifty-six votes for the fighting sailor who wears the scars of battle. . . ."

Above all, Kennedy had kept Johnson informed. The Vice-President was "in" in that sense, if not socially. He participated in most of the meetings on the Cuban missile crisis, for instance. No major government operations were going on anywhere that he did not have some knowledge of—unlike Harry Truman, who entered the White House and only then learned that he had an atom bomb ready to explode.

In return, Johnson appreciated the President's deference to him. He never violated the unofficial canon that vice-presidents ought to be seen and not heard; he never got out front with a news conference or an unguarded statement: I do not know of

any reporter who got a "leak" from Johnson that damaged or denigrated the President. In fact, Johnson leaks of any kind were few and far between throughout his vice-presidency.

Moreover, vice-presidents—as presidents have allowed them more stature and responsibility—have come more and more to be regarded as important administration officials. To cast Johnson aside for 1964 would be politically embarrassing. Besides, Kennedy had said in 1960, when the two men were racing each other for the Democratic nomination:

"If I didn't want this job myself, I'd get behind Lyndon. He's the ablest man I know in American politics and he really cares about this country as I want a president to care."

Kennedy's entire treatment of Johnson suggests that he considered the Texan as a man who could take over the presidency capably, if need be, and there was nothing more important than that.

So he tried to scotch the "dump" rumors at a news conference. Johnson would be on the ticket again, he said, "of course he will, no question he will." But the capital was more impressed by the White House social office's announcement that Jacqueline Kennedy soon would accompany her husband to Texas on a political trip designed to help Johnson mend his home fences. Mrs. Kennedy, it was agreed, would be a powerful asset in Texas and if she campaigned for the ticket in 1964.

That month, there was of course the usual flow of Washington minutiae. President Kennedy interceded and saved Mrs. Kennedy's childhood home, Merrywood Estate on the Potomac, from being sold by her family to a high-rise apartment developer. He and the First Lady moved into their new $100,000 weekend house on Rattlesnake Mountain in Virginia. The Department of Labor added the high cost of dying to the price index. Norman Thomas turned seventy-nine and said he did not choose to run again. Earl Warren rejected a proposal by Representative Robert Ashmore of South Carolina and Judge Howard Smith of Virginia that "In God We Trust" be carved in stone above the Supreme Court bench.

The President watched a Polaris missile fired at Cape Canaveral. He also cut a ribbon above the Mason-Dixon line and opened the last link of an interstate highway that made it possible to drive from Washington to New York without hitting a traffic light, at a cost in tolls of $4.55. Then he went on to New York City and entered Manhattan without a police escort, adding eight minutes to the drive from the airport to the Carlyle Hotel, and causing a police official to remind him that he had taken "the most unnecessary risks." Earlier in the month, Kennedy had laid a wreath on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at the Arlington National Cemetery.

But what I recall mostly was the sense of trouble in the air—probably not irreparable trouble, but serious enough for worry. Goldwater, the backlash, Vietnam, hatred in the South—these were ominous portents, and we marked time until their meaning could be read. Questions at Kennedy news conferences frequently suggested that the President was in trouble. How did he feel about it?

That November, he told the reporters he still liked being President because "it's rewarding and I've given before the definition of happiness of the Greeks . . . the full use of your powers along lines of excellence. I find that, therefore, the presidency provides some happiness."

But James Reston of The New York *Times* made a swing around the country and came back to write:

"There is a vague feeling of doubt and disappointment in the country about President Kennedy's first term. . . . One has the distinct impression that the American people are going to reelect him, probably by a wide margin, but don't quite believe in him. . . . Accordingly, his problem is probably not how to get elected but how to govern. He is admired, but he has not made the people feel as he feels, or lifted them beyond their private purposes to see the larger purposes he has in mind.

"He is simply better known than anybody else, and this will probably be enough to assure his reelection, but this is a far cry from the atmosphere he promised when he ran for the presidency in 1960."

Then John Fitzgerald Kennedy went to Dallas and was murdered. The troubled and involuted Texan, Lyndon Johnson, became President and many people believe that at that moment—2:39 p.m., November 22, 1963—a Golden Age ended.